

Senate Hearing on S.B. 1012

Tuesday, March 15, 2011

Members of the Human Services Committee, thank you for hearing this testimony regarding S.B. 1012 recommending the dissolution of BESB.

My name is Faith Horter. I have been a teacher of the blind and visually impaired for 26 years, 6 of those as an employee of BESB. I have been blessed by the opportunity to be part of a team that offers comprehensive services to our students. In addition to formal meetings, we have the opportunity to pass on information to the VR counselor, Rehabilitation Technologists, and Mobility instructors when we see each other at the office. We are able to collectively plan in-services for the parents, students, and staff that work with them in the schools.

Before coming to BESB, I was employed in rural Virginia for 20 years. In most locations, educational services were the responsibility of the individual counties. The state attempted to provide preschool, VR, and O&M services. Due to staff shortages and the immense geographical area of the state, services to my area were minimal at best.

The state was able to provide items to districts that were purchased with APH quota funds. These included books, tape recorders, and some supplemental teaching materials. It did not include embossers, Braille notetakers, scanners, screen magnification, or Braille related software.

This required the Teacher of the Visually Impaired (TVI) to petition the school system for these funds. Children with blindness/low vision are a 'low incident population'. Schools were hesitant to spend money on one or two students when the money could benefit a larger population, such as the learning impaired. In locations where funds were not to be found, the teacher could solicit the public or the student did without.

Orientation and Mobility services were hard to come by unless the teacher was also certified in this area. Cane users may see the instructor once a month or less.

Students often did not meet a vocational rehabilitation counselor until they were 16 or 17.

What was the effect of this delivery model? Most students from rural locations were not ready for college or the work environment. Career expectations were extremely low. If a student in these areas made it to college, s/he still had the challenge of job placement upon graduation. One student from our area graduated with a political science degree and ended up working as a phone customer service representative at J. Crew.

How do these outcomes cost the state more money? These children do not become gainfully employed. As a result, they contribute little if any to the local and state tax coffers. In fact, a large number these students stayed home after high school and collected disability. Therefore they became a drain on the system rather than a contributor.

Connecticut has an agency that provides for the needs of the blind and visually impaired citizens of the state. Would we like to continue to provide the support that allows these individuals to be productive citizens or would we like to pay for the long term maintenance of individuals who cannot financially contribute to the state? I sincerely hope the committee considers this question and supports the first scenario.

Thank you.

Faith Horter